

Securing New Jersey Against Terrorist Threats: How We Can Make Our State Safer (Op-Ed)

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How We Can Make Our State Safer
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The release of the 9-11 Commission Report and the August 1, 2004 disclosure by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that al-Qaeda terrorists continue to plan deadly terrorist attacks against American targets -- primarily those in or in close proximity to major cities -- have caused federal, state, and local governments around the nation to ask the question: "Are we more prepared to deter and respond to terrorist attacks now than we were on September 11, 2001?" While I believe the answer is "yes," there is still much more that needs to be done. In particular, I believe that homeland security funding should reflect a state's risk of being attacked by terrorists -- and not simply be divided equally among the 50 states. Also, we must make sure that our First Responders, which include our police, fire fighters, ambulance corps members, and emergency response teams, receive the funds to which they are entitled without delay.

In an effort to make these goals a reality, I recently joined my fellow Congressmen and Senators from New Jersey in sending a bipartisan letter to the Department of Homeland Security Secretary, Tom Ridge, regarding the issue of homeland security funding. Specifically, this letter called for the DHS to change the formula for allocating homeland security funding to one that places a greater emphasis on those states that are more at risk of being the target of a terrorist attack, such as those that contain large amounts of critical infrastructure and have a higher population density, rather than the current system of guaranteeing a minimum level of funding for each state.

At present, New Jersey, the nation's most densely populated state, receives less than 3 percent of federal funds distributed nationally. According to a politically-drawn formula set up by Congress, approximately 40 percent of the more than \$2 billion funds set aside each fiscal year for state homeland security programs is distributed in equal amounts to every state, regardless of size or risk of terrorist attack. The remaining 60 percent of funds are distributed according to each state's population, as specified by the Department of Homeland Security. This formula fails to meet the current homeland security needs of our nation, because it doesn't distribute those funds in proportion to each state's risk of terrorist attack. The present distribution system wrongly sends a disproportionate share of federal dollars to states and localities that are not as likely to be attacked, such as the cornfields in Iowa and Nebraska, at the expense of states that have many more likely terror targets, like New Jersey. Our state in particular needs a greater portion of homeland security aid due to its vast number of potential targets of terror, such as the largest port on the East Coast, the third busiest airport in the country, our four nuclear power plants, and the six tunnels and bridges that connect New Jersey to New York City.

As the Congressman who represents the people of the Ninth Congressional District of New Jersey, which includes 37 municipalities in Bergen, Hudson, and Passaic Counties, I see the great burdens that many local and state law enforcement agencies struggle with due to Congress' inadequate federal funding of our front-line First Responders. For example, when the DHS recently raised the threat level to Code Orange, or high alert, for Newark, New Jersey, New York City, and Washington, D.C., those cities and their surrounding towns further depleted their scarce budgets and resources to secure potential terrorist targets. That is why I also recently joined with my fellow Democratic Members of Congress from New Jersey to send a letter to President Bush that urged him to immediately release the Fiscal Year 2004 homeland security funding for New Jersey so that our First Responders can, without delay, secure our highest risk areas at the increased threat level.

I believe strongly and have argued in the Appropriations Committee and on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives that Congress must reallocate our nation's homeland security funding so that it fairly and fully addresses

the threat of terrorist attacks on dense concentrations of population and on our nation's critical infrastructure, instead of unnecessarily guaranteeing each state a minimum allocation regardless of its risk of incurring a terrorist attack. I regret that this Congress and this President failed to give appropriate relief to places like New Jersey -- which are high on the terrorists' hit list and filled with terrorist targets -- and instead gave most of the money to rural, Midwestern agricultural states. I will persist in urging the Congress and the President to change the allocation formula. In the meantime, the President must expedite the release of the previously appropriated emergency federal funding for New Jersey's First Responders so that they can continue to protect the citizens and critical infrastructure of this great state from terrorist attacks and help reduce the financial burden on New Jersey taxpayers. It is in our national interest to do so -- and in New Jersey's.

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[Go back](#)